

### *The Onion's* Most Trenchant Headline

The satirical site's announcement that it is acquiring Alex Jones's Infowars created confusion—and perfectly captured the media world we're living in.

By [Megan Garber](#)



Illustration by The Atlantic

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This week, Americans [learned](#) that a Fox News personality could become the civilian head of the nation's armed forces. They heard about a new [government-adjacent agency](#) that will be co-headed by Elon Musk and named the Department of Government Efficiency (or ... [DOGE](#)). The headlines, occasioned by Donald Trump's imminent return to the White House, were new reasons to ask an old question inspired by a classic satirical website: *The Onion* or real? (The answer: extremely real.) But yesterday morning, reality got an even more *Onion*-y twist, this time courtesy of the publication itself. *The Onion* [announced](#) that its parent company was the winning bidder in a bankruptcy auction to acquire Infowars. That infamous site—the longtime home of the conspiracist Alex Jones, and a bleak metonym for an age of [irony poisoning](#) and [reckless lies](#)—will now operate under the auspices of a site whose homepage, as of this writing, [was reporting](#): “Oyster Cracker-Wise, Nation Doing Pretty Good.”

Headlines are *The Onion's* stock-in-trade. The site's articles complete the “fake newspaper” aesthetic but are, for the most part, beside the point. Yesterday's news followed that form. As a headline—“*The Onion* Buys Infowars”—the acquisition brought amusement (reactions included “metal,” “poetry,” and applause emoji). As a broader story, though, it brought a

familiar kind of addlement: Was this news-news or “fake news”? Was it a prank? (If so, who was the butt of the joke?) “I can’t tell if this is real or satire,” one commenter said [on Instagram](#), speaking for many.

The uncertainty made its way into coverage of the acquisition as well. Several journalistic outlets, [reporting on the purchase](#), attributed a press release to “Bryce P. Tetraeder, CEO of the Onion’s parent company Global Tetrahedron”—apparently not realizing that the executive’s name was, itself, an attempt at satire. (*The Onion* has a tradition of assigning fake names to its leadership; this particular leader’s bio [describes](#) him, in part, as “media proprietor, entrepreneur, human trafficker, thought leader, and venture capitalist.”)

But the confusion was, in its topsy-turvy way, clarifying. “*The Onion* or real?” is a lighthearted question that has also become a way of life. We muddle, all of us, through a fog of ambient uncertainty. And this, in turn, gives way to suspicion. *Question everything*, that quintessential cry of the conspiracist, has also become a stark tenet of news literacy. In a media environment where [fact and fiction blur](#), ever more steadily, into each other—where so many pieces of news are punctuated with invisible asterisks and scare quotes and question marks—doubt is written into the texture of things: Real person or bot? Real footage or deepfake? News-news or “news”? The [lulz-to-life pipeline](#) has never been shorter.

The result is not merely a White House that treats politics as an endless flame war—a government of the meme, by the meme, for the meme. The uncertainty also encourages, among the people who live within it, a particular strain of cynicism, the kind that can settle in when, to paraphrase the scholar Hannah Arendt, everything is possible and nothing is true.

The Infowars acquisition is an everything/nothing proposition: Is the purchase satirical or earnest? Was it made in good faith or bad? Is it a troll or a remedy? It is neither. It is both. “We thought this would be a hilarious joke,” Ben Collins, the (real) chief executive of Global Tetrahedron, told *The New York Times* of the decision to buy Jones’s site. And the whole thing—down to the (satirical) [press release](#) calling Infowars “a cornucopia of malleable assets and minds”—is, very openly, a stunt. But it is also, the publication insists, a strategy. Its comedy will be corrective, and potentially lucrative. Infowars will relaunch in January, Collins [told](#) the *Times*, as a [ClickHole](#)-style parody of Jones and his fellow conspiracists. In all those ways, the acquisition is also something of a concession: the martial logic of “own the libs,” upended through literal ownership.

The best satire will spin, always, around an axis of earnestness; its humor will make a serious point. One of *The Onion*’s [most famous headlines](#)—one that reliably goes viral after a new episode of mass gun violence—did precisely that: “No Way to Prevent This,’ Says Only Nation Where This Regularly Happens.” The updated Infowars could engage in that sort of satire too, making it a fitting addition to *The Onion*’s satiric universe. (*The Onion* mocks legacy media; *ClickHole*, started by *The Onion* and now owned by the team behind the game-design firm Cards Against Humanity, mocks new media; Infowars, it seems, will mock the people peddling media that mock the truth.) *The Onion*’s goal, the

publication [asserted](#) in a statement yesterday, “is to end Infowars’ relentless barrage of disinformation for the sake of selling supplements and replace it with *The Onion*’s relentless barrage of humor for good.”

But even that humor will be rooted in the rawest form of earnestness: grief. The acquisition was supported by families of the children [murdered](#) in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, in 2012—families burdened, in their anguish, by [Jones’s baseless insistence](#) that the whole massacre had been staged. The new site, in addition to publishing parody, will also attempt to educate its audience about the human cost of guns. It will feature advertising from the nonprofit advocacy organization Everytown for Gun Safety. Everytown’s president, John Feinblatt, [described](#) “the potential this new venture has to help Everytown reach new audiences ready to hold the gun industry accountable.” The sale itself, one of the families’ lawyers [said](#) in a statement, is a form of accountability as well—for the man who, for so long, [profited from their pain](#).

This is not a typical case of tragedy followed by farce; it is, in Infowars’ new owners’ telling, tragedy *adjudicated* by farce. But “laughter” and “murdered children” sit uncomfortably with each other. And *The Onion*’s public messaging has suggested that the purchase, in classic *Onion* fashion, is still a headline in search of a story. What will Infowars’ parody look like? Will the site attempt to coax its current audience away from [Jones’s conspiracies](#)? Or will it simply mock its readers? In [a social-media post](#) yesterday morning, Collins clarified that the sale has given *The Onion* ownership of all of Infowars’ assets, including the site’s content, its broadcasting equipment, [Jones’s supplements business](#), and the intellectual property related to those supplements. He added: “We are still trying to figure out what to do with it.” The earnest comment was an adjunct to the final lines of the [press release](#) from “Bryce P. Tetraeder”: “All will be revealed in due time. For now, let’s enjoy this win and toast to the continued consolidation of power and capital.”

Cynicism is typically seen as an absence of earnestness—as a posture that places itself, on the irony continuum, somewhere near sarcasm and suspicion. It can be that, definitely. But it can also be, as Arendt observed, a form of earnestness gone awry, a means of coping with a world in which so many things refuse to mean what they claim to. Cynicism, in her framework, is a way to protect the ego in an atmosphere of widespread mistrust. Of the people who lived among endless propaganda, Arendt wrote: “Instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness.”

Arendt was writing about life under totalitarianism in a century now long past. But her findings are all too timely. Cynicism as she describes it—as sanctuary, as armor, as an outgrowth of despair—is a core feature of life on the web. It will probably become ever more common as the real stories look ever more like satire. Cynicism, as Arendt framed it, can also be a form of complicity. It inures people to the fictions that surround them. It makes them [apathetic](#), compliant, subdued. But cynicism is also, according to Arendt, a reasonable reaction to an unsteady world. Humans don’t do well with uncertainty. For all the

concessions it demands, the cynical style has one very obvious benefit: It provides an illusion of control. It imposes order, or at least the semblance of it, on a tumultuous world. (In that way, it turns out, it is very much like a conspiracy theory.)

Satire can do similar work. It can be an eloquent antidote to the kind of chaos that Arendt described: It can cut through the haze. It can clarify things, joke by joke. The earnestness of humor is, it seems, what *The Onion* hopes to bring to the site that turned suspicion into currency. The Infowars acquisition, Collins told the *Times*, “is going to be our answer to this no-guardrails world where there are no gatekeepers and everything’s kind of insane.” The irony is that the purchase—as a joke, as justice—may further erode the guardrails. The “answer” meant to address all the madness may be new, but it will provoke the same old question: “*The Onion* or real?”

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News

## Onion CEO discusses Infowars purchase and plans for site's future



The Onion CEO on buying InfoWars: 'This is a really funny moment'

November 15, 2024, 3:02 PM



EXHIBIT 5



Satirical website The Onion [purchased Alex Jones' site InfoWars](#) on Thursday,

For years, Jones exemplified far-right anger and sensationalism. Infowars began as a website and a public access TV program before transitioning to livestreams. It focused on far-right conspiracy theories and was primarily funded by advertisements for dietary supplements and alternative medicine.

After the tragic 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, which claimed the lives of 20 first-graders and six adults, Jones shocked and devastated the nation by claiming that this massacre was actually a hoax. He alleged, without any evidence, that lawmakers were involved, the Obamas were complicit, and even that the parents of the victims were in on it.

After years of insisting that he retract his false statements, the parents finally sued him for defamation. In court, they spoke about the impact that Jones' lies had on their lives. The parents won more than \$1 billion in damages, stating that this was the only way to put an end to his actions.



Jones was ordered to relinquish almost all of his possessions and a portion of the website he created. On Thursday, The Onion, the satirical newspaper and website famous for its humor, acquired the site with the approval of the Sandy Hook parents. It also won the applause of gun control advocacy group Everytown for Gun Safety, which will have an exclusive advertising deal with the site.



The Onion CEO on buying InfoWars: 'This is a really funny moment'

Mario Tama/Getty Images

ABC News' ["Start Here"](#) podcast host Brad Mielke spoke with Ben Collins, CEO of The Onion, and John Feinblatt, president of Everytown for Gun Safety, about the future of Infowars.

COLLINS: Because it would be very funny. I think we all agree this is really funny. Don't you agree this is really funny? I think this is the funniest thing in the world. I think when we, you know, when we initially thought about it in June, when we read in the newspaper that it was for sale, we all had the same reaction it'd be like, it'd be really funny if The Onion bought it. And then we really thought about it like, but actually, how could we do this?

And I, from a previous life, I used to be a disinformation reporter. I knew the Sandy Hook family's lawyers. And I gave them a ring. I was like, what does this look like? Is this really for sale? And all this stuff. And, you know, over the next few months, it became real. And we started talking to Everytown about this. Everytown was founded after Sandy Hook happened. And we wanted a good launch partner for this that made sense, and this is obviously the thing that makes the most sense.

Then we started talking to like Onion Hall of Famers, like the Hall of Fame comedy writers that have come through the halls of The Onion over the last few years. And when you NDA them and tell them this is happening, they get pretty excited.



So we built up this whole universe and this

whole world that we're excited to show everybody in a couple of months. But, you know, first just bathe in this, this is a really funny moment. You're allowed to laugh at it. I hope, when you, I hope if you got a push alert or something -- or if this is the first time you're hearing of it -- when you heard this happen, I hope you, hope you laughed really hard because it's a funny moment.



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Consumerbags

**START HERE:** John, what was your reaction when The Onion came to you guys with this idea?

FEINBLATT: Well, I think most people would think at first blush, sort of strange bedfellows, but we thought the opposite. For years, The Onion has been really highlighting the crisis of gun violence in America. And obviously, that's what we've been doing. And we thought that was perfect synergy here. You know, at our fingertips, we've got facts and we've got stories and we've got research, but they've got the creativity to really cut through misinformation and to reach new audiences.

**START HERE:** I was going to say, The Onion has always been, every time there's a big mass shooting, The Onion has this famous headline of "No way to prevent this, says the only country where this regularly happens."

FEINBLATT: Without a doubt. And we've known them and admired them for years. And what we know is that when you've got hate-filled misinformation, humor is sometimes the way to really get a reset and to really shine a spotlight on the fact that misinformation is really fueling irrational thinking.

**START HERE:** Ben, how will this actually work? Because is it just the website? Like Alex Jones had a number of platforms that were part of the company that was, is Infowars. Right? So what do you guys acquire and what do you do with it?

COLLINS: Yeah, we acquire everything. In fact, we acquire all of his broadcasting equipment. We acquire his whole supplement empire, which we are at this moment still trying to figure out what to do with.

**START HERE:** Wait like literally? Wait like, are there like pills in boxes somewhere?

COLLINS: There are pills in boxes somewhere. We don't even know where they are, but we are trying to figure that out right now. And like, that's the thing here, is that we -- it was important to the families is that we really try to take him off the air for a couple of days and see what happens. And that's important to us, too.

Like, we want to be able to wipe the slate clean with this thing and, you know, in a couple of years what we want to be able to say is if you think of Infowars, you really think of this hilarious joke that we pulled off or, you know, even better that we've built something on top of it that's big and flourishing and crazy and is the funniest website that you know.

**START HERE:** Wait that's my question, is it like, does a website supplant it now or and like, what does that actually look like?

COLLINS: Yeah, we will take over-- Infowars.com I believe right now is down and we will take that over once that is transferred over to us. And then we'll start building a whole new world there.

**START HERE:** Sorry, I just want to be clear though. What does that mean? Like a whole new world? Is it like The Onion now also has a different domain that's called Infowars. Or is it a totally different thing?

COLLINS: Yeah. No, we're building a whole new website with, you know, our own -- so basically what we want to do is there is a sub economy of alt media people who've gone, you know, unmocked for too long. And we, those people, we call them alt media. It kind of like took over everything like quietly, you know, the podcast people selling you supplements, the people getting you addicted to fear and anger and all that stuff.

And it's not just Alex Jones types. It's all sorts of weird guys that you see on your TikTok and Instagram feeds. We're going to create a world where that is, you know, appropriately -- the appropriate amount -- ritually mocked.

FEINBLATT: And, you know, when you think about the pain and the suffering that Alex Jones visited on the Sandy Hook families, the fact that Everytown and The Onion are painting a new chapter, there's no other way to describe this than poetic justice. It's almost karmic justice.

**START HERE: How much did you guys pay for it?**

COLLINS: \$1.1 trillion.

**START HERE: I don't think that's true. I think that is parody.**

COLLINS: No, it's look, it's, I agree with you. It's a small price to pay, but we decided that, look, in our vast empire of puppy mills and other things that Global Tetrahedron funds ...

**START HERE: Just to be clear with our listeners, that is the parent company you set up with the same name as the The Onion's -- fictional corporate overlords, your company does not do all those things.**

COLLINS: Um, that's, that's up for you to decide first of all. Second of all, yeah, it's just, you know, it's a small price to pay for, for a good, public good.

**START HERE:** OK, but if, so, if you're not going to tell me and that's fine that you guys are not going to tell me how much you actually paid for this. I guess the thing I want to get at is, is this an expensive way to troll people? Is it a way for the Onion to effectively donate money to Everytown? Because I know Everytown is going to have an exclusive advertising deal with you guys.

Or is this something, is this like a way to have an impact on the conversation around conspiracy theorists? Does this last beyond that push alert that you just mentioned that made people laugh?

**COLLINS:** Oh yeah, absolutely. Like our goal is to make this a, like I keep saying a whole universe, a whole new universe for people to understand. And I just want to make it clear, the money goes to the families. The families are owed \$1 billion from Alex Jones. All of this money will go -- for the sale of Infowars -- it goes directly to the families. And we are going to make something better.

We're going to pay this over and give some people a good place on the internet to go to because that's very rare now. That's a big part of why we want to do this. We want, the media ecosystem is just filled with like lies and hate and garbage, and we want to give people a place to at least laugh at it.

**START HERE:** John, does this take Alex Jones out of the equation entirely? He's already responded to this, saying that this is all "rigged," that "Infowars is stronger than ever," that his empire is stronger than ever. What's your response?

FEINBLATT: We're putting Alex Jones in the rearview mirror. We're painting a new

EXHIBIT 5

chapter and we're going to reach new audiences.

And I think that's what's most important here for both Everytown and for The Onion to talk about this in yes, in a humorous way, but to really expose the damage misinformation does and talk to people that are beyond just talking to ourselves. Talking to conservative people, talking to young people and reaching them and really, really exposing how misinformation distorts reality.

**START HERE:** That's the thing, because I keep wondering if, like, I doubt the average Infowars listener or consumer sticks around and goes like, oh, I got to check out this website or this Twitter account or whatever it is. You're saying, you're not assuming you'll get those people tuning in every day, but you do think you'll reach what, regular people at some point?

FEINBLATT: I think we will reach all Americans and probably some of the people who have been following Infowars because, look, when it comes to gun safety, we know where the American public stands, but we also know the damage that Alex Jones has visited -- not just on the Sandy Hook families -- but on on people all across the country in thinking about it. His currency is fear. And we're ending that chapter.

**START HERE:** All right. Ben Collins, John Feinblatt, thank you both so much.





By [AL Jazeera Staff](#)

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In this case, it's not satire.

InfoWars, the website of conspiracy theorist [Alex Jones](#), has been purchased by The Onion – a parody outlet – putting an end to the controversial platform that drummed up anti-government paranoia in the United States for a quarter of a century.

The auction sale on Thursday came as the result of a 2022 ruling that found Jones liable for nearly \$1.5bn in damages for defaming the families of the victims of a mass shooting at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, by calling the attack a hoax.

The 2012 shooting at [Sandy Hook](#) claimed the lives of 20 children and six educators, but Jones falsely claimed that the incident did not happen, arguing that the victims and survivors were crisis actors.

The Onion CEO Ben Collins confirmed the sale on Thursday, saying that it took place with the backing of Sandy Hook families.

“The Onion is proud to acquire InfoWars, and we look forward to continuing its storied tradition of scaring the site’s users with lies until they fork over their cold, hard cash,”

He added that he hopes that the families of the Sandy Hook shooting victims will find joy in the “cosmic joke” that The Onion now owns InfoWars.

### **The Onion**

The Onion is a parody website that publishes satirical news stories that often present a caricature of politicians and current events.

But with US and international politics taking strange turns in recent years, some Onion headlines have come close to describing actual news.

The fictitious CEO of Global Tetrahedron LLC, The Onion’s parent company, called InfoWars an “invaluable tool for brainwashing and controlling the masses”.

“Through it all, InfoWars has shown an unswerving commitment to manufacturing anger and radicalizing the most vulnerable members of society – values that resonate deeply with all of us at Global Tetrahedron,” a satirical statement, attributed to Bryce P Tetraeder, said. “No price would be too high for such a cornucopia of malleable assets and minds.” On a more serious note, the advocacy group Everytown for Gun Safety announced that it will be an exclusive advertiser on InfoWars when it relaunches in its new format.

“It’s fitting that a platform once used to profit off of tragedy will be a tool of education, hence our multi-year advertising commitment to this new venture,” John Feinblatt, president of Everytown for Gun Safety, said in a statement.

“We’re proud to be a part of what comes next, not only in terms of staunching the flow of hurtful misinformation, but also for the potential this new venture has to help Everytown reach new audiences.”

The home page of InfoWars currently features a short statement that reads: “Site unavailable till further notice.”

The US has been suffering from [rampant gun violence](#) amid lax regulations on the purchase and carrying of firearms.

According to the tracker Gun Violence Archive, 18,854 people were killed in US shootings last year.

The [Second Amendment](#) of the US Constitution grants the right to bear arms. Democrats usually advocate tighter control of weapons, but Republicans largely view gun ownership as a fundamental right.

That’s why Jones and other right-wing conspiracy theorists have questioned mass shootings in the country.

The [Sandy Hook](#) families have been pushing to hold Jones accountable for the falsehoods he has spread about them.

Since the 2022 ruling in their favour, the families have been engaged in an ongoing legal fight over the collection of the damages and the fate of Jones’s assets, including InfoWars. Chris Mattei, a lawyer for the Connecticut plaintiffs, welcomed the purchase of InfoWars by The Onion, calling it a “public service” that will diminish [Jones’s reach](#).

“From day one, these families have fought against all odds to bring true accountability to Alex Jones and his corrupt business,” Mattei said in a statement.

“Our clients knew that true accountability meant an end to Infowars and an end to Jones’s ability to spread lies, pain and fear at scale.”

### **Jones defiant**

For his part, Jones – defiant as ever – pledged to continue broadcasting and fighting to keep the website, saying that he would seek a court injunction to block the sale.

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t is unclear how much The Onion paid for InfoWars and whether the families will receive the funds and how.

“This is the tyranny of the new world order – desperate to silence the American people,” Jones said in a video posted on X, decrying the sale of his website as an attack on free speech.

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While the First Amendment of the US Constitution protects free speech, there are state and federal US laws that prohibit defamation based on falsehoods.

Jones had amassed millions of viewers with his bombastic style and alarmist warnings about plots by “the globalists” to destroy America.

He moved from the fringes of the media landscape as he grew his audience and he has conducted interviews with mainstream right-wing politicians, including then-candidate [Donald Trump](#) in 2015.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks hate groups, describes Jones as “one of the most prolific and influential conspiracy theorists in contemporary America”.

“With millions of regular viewers and over two decades on the air, Jones has created a financial and brand empire out of selling misinformation and disinformation, as well as self-help dietary products,” the group says in a report on Jones.

“His uncorroborated reporting has led to many innocent people being harassed by internet trolls both online and in person.”